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James P. Baxter 3d Dies; Ex-President of Williams

By ALDEN WHITMAN

James Phinney Baxter 3d, former president of Williams College, Harvard professor and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, died Tuesday in a nursing home in Williamstown, Mass. Mr. Baxter, who retired from Williams in 1961 after 24 years as president, was 82 years old.

His prize book, "Scientists Against Time," was a history of the Office of Scientific Research and Development in World War II. The book, which won the Pulitzer in 1947, chronicled the development of the proximity fuse, sonar, radio buoys, antimalarials, gunfire control and similar applications of technology to the war.

"A fine book, obviously one of the most important documents written so far about the war," commented E. B. Garside in The New York Times Book Review.

"The author," Mr. Garside continued, "has a reticent clear style admirably suited to pin down his refractory material. . . His preoccupation with technical detail has not diminished his grasp of wartime science as a whole."

Mr. Baxter's ability to convey the complex in understandable language was a talent he had honed as a professor of history at Harvard, where he served from 1925 to 1937. A former student recalled Mr. Baxter yesterday as an admirable, stentorian-voiced lecturer. "Bald, mustached, bespectacled, moon-faced, he invariably came to class in a three-button suit, secured by the top button, and with his jacket pockets bulging with a miscellany of notes," the former student said, adding:

"His courses were tough, but he never put you to sleep—and he was a merciful grader."

Master of Adams House

Mr. Baxter taught diplomatic history, naval history and international relations; and for six years he was master of Adams House, one of the showplaces of the Harvard house system for undergraduates.

In his 24 years at Williams, Mr. Baxter transformed the college from an institution that educated young men who were more rich than bright into a school that put a premium on intellectual accomplishment. The average grade at Williams was D-plus—not even the traditional gentleman's C—when Mr. Baxter took over in 1937.

When he retired, that average had been raised to between C-plus and B-minus.

To effect the change, Mr. Baxter increased scholarships and student aid more than six-fold and cut way down on admissions from prep schools. He also quadrupled the college's budget for instruction. "Vital teaching is the essential thing," he said of small colleges. The teacher-student ratio was reduced to 1 to 10.

Mr. Baxter also enriched the curriculum by vitalizing a backward science department and by making it possible for students to major in such combined fields as American history and literature, or art and religion.

Williams enrollments increased during Mr. Baxter's presidency from 820 to 1,100, and the number of seniors entering graduate school rose from 25 to 50 per cent by 1961, when he stepped down.

Lecture to a Bear

Mr. Baxter did some lecturing to students at Williams—and once to a bear caught in a trap. The incident occurred when he and a guide were on a fishing trip without a gun. The guide suggested that to put the animal out of its misery, he hit it over the head with an ax while Mr. Baxter distracted its attention. Mr. Baxter recalled that he walked toward the beast, expounding, in his customary emphatic tones, the Florida boundary dispute of 1803-19 with Spain.

The bear reportedly was awestruck. "The Florida dispute was always a difficult thing to explain to a class," Mr. Baxter said afterward, "and I felt if I could hold the attention of students with it, I might hold a bear's."

Mr. Baxter was a staunch Republican and at the same time a sturdy defender of academic freedom and the right of dissent. In the hysteria of the McCarthy era of some 20 years ago, he supported an outspoken Williams professor whose dismissal as "a pinko" was demanded by influential alumni. Mr. Baxter's readiness to regard colleges as a free market in ideas earned him the affection and respect of his faculty.

A native of Maine, Mr. Baxter was born in Portland on Feb. 15, 1893. He was president and valedictorian of his



William H. Tague, 1965

James Phinney Baxter 3d

class at Williams in 1914. Contracting tuberculosis while working in Wall Street, he went to Colorado to recuperate. He did graduate work in history there and taught at Colorado College before joining the Harvard faculty in 1925. His doctoral thesis disputed the longheld idea that the Monitor and the Merrimac were the world's first iron-clad ships. He gave the primacy to La Gloire, a French vessel of 1859.

Recruiter for O.S.S.

Popular at Harvard, Mr. Baxter left reluctantly to head Williams, founded in 1793, as its 10th president. He took leave in World War II to, among other things, recruit academic personnel for the Office of Strategic Services and to serve as historian for the Office of Scientific Research and Development. In the nineteen-fifties, he was a member of the Gaither Commission, which studied the cold war.

Although Mr. Baxter published few books, he wrote extensively for history and law journals and was a senior fellow of the Council on Foreign Affairs. For his contributions to education and history he collected 17 honorary degrees, including one from Harvard and another from Columbia. He was also made a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and was elected to the Century Association.

His wife, the former Anne Holden Strang, died in 1961. He is survived by three sons, James Phinney Baxter 4th, a Chicago banker; Arthur B. of Newtown, Conn., and Stephen B., a historian, of Chapel Hill, N. C.; a sister, Mrs. Sam Bruce, eight grandchildren and a great-grandson.